

Boston University
College of Arts and Sciences

RELIGION, SECULARISM, & POWER

(TOPICS IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT)

Fall 2020
CAS RN452/GRS RN752

Tuesday 3:30-6:15
Remote Class

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David Wojnarowicz, *The Death of American Spirituality*, 1987

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What forms does religion take in the modern world—and in the U.S. in particular? Do we live in a secular age? How do we understand the relationship between religion and secularism? And how do genealogies of secularism shape the politics of ‘religious freedom’? This seminar examines the growing field of secularism studies and postsecular critique, including its intersections with religious studies, anthropology, feminist and queer studies, and critical race theory. We will pay special attention to histories of religious freedom, secularism, and politics in the U.S.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1) **Careful reading and thoughtful participation** are necessary to succeed in this course. As you are reading, consider the following questions:

- *What is the central argument (or set of arguments) of this essay or book?*
- *Who are this author's most important conversation partners, whether implicitly or explicitly mentioned in the text?*
- *What key themes or ideas does this work add to our analytical vocabulary on religion, secularism, and power?*
- *What questions do you have about the text?*

Readings in the syllabus following a bullet point are for required for all students. For undergrads, required reading will usually be capped at ~150 pages per week (and often less). Readings following the designation “GS” are required for students enrolled in the graduate section (RN752) of this course. Undergrads are more than welcome to read these, too, but it’s not required! “Recommended readings” are just that: suggestions for delving deeper into the conversation of a given week. These lists are just a start—many, many other readings could follow in any of these weeks. If you would like to read more in an area, don’t hesitate to meet with me to discuss possibilities.

If you are taking this class **synchronously**, you should aim to participate regularly in class discussions. To my mind, regular participation means that you speak (or write in the Zoom chat box) in a substantial way several times per class meeting. You could be responding to a question, asking a question, following up on a point, etc. Don’t worry about “sounding smart”—good discussions never work if everyone is trying to sound smart. They work best when we approach texts with humility and try to understand difficult materials and concepts collaboratively. In addition to participating in Zoom discussions, you should also follow the Discussion Board set up on Blackboard and plan to contribute at least once per week—perhaps jotting down a passage you found confusing or a point you found particularly compelling from one of the readings or by responding to someone else’s post. If you are taking this class **asynchronously**, then you should take full advantage of the Discussion Board set up on Blackboard, and you should plan to post 3-4 times per week.

2) **Weekly In-class Reading Responses:** I will post one or more prompts for reading response freewriting at 3:30pm on the day of our course meetings (Weeks 2-14). At this time, a prompt will appear in Blackboard under “Reading Responses” for the given week. I will simultaneously circulate it to the class via email.

From 3:30-3:50pm (i.e., for about 20 minutes), free write in response to the question or questions posed. Answer the prompt as thoroughly as possible. (You may choose to focus on one or more questions, depending on your interests, etc.) Your response should make specific references to the text (e.g., Mahmood, p20), but you should stick as closely to your own voice as possible. Use this as an opportunity to translate the ideas we encounter into your own words. If you conclude your answer before the 20 minutes are up, revisit the prompt and keep writing.

- Is there another way to answer this question? *Keep writing.*
- Are their contradictions in your response that need to be acknowledged? Embraced? Resolved? *Keep writing.*
- Does the content of your response dovetail with issues addressed in previous readings? *Keep writing.*
- What else would you want to know (historically, theoretically, etc.) in order to answer this question more fully? *Keep writing.*

Around 3:50pm, finish your thought and stop writing. Submit your reading response via Blackboard **no later than 3:55pm**. Take a break—stretch, hydrate, caffeinate, etc.—and prepare yourself to join our class for conversation at 4pm. Most weeks, we’ll convene via Zoom for the rest of our time together, with a 10-15 minute break in the middle.

I hope you will see this freewriting assignment as a way to practice better reading and writing. If you put in the work to read and understand our class materials, this should provide an opportunity to begin processing that work and building your reading comprehension toward critical analysis. This assignment will also prove useful in the following ways:

- To maximize opportunities for synchronous learning during our seminar’s assigned time while avoiding Zoom fatigue
- To develop a collective writing practice that allows us to synthesize the course material while decreasing the amount of prep time demanded of you outside of class
- To focus our conversations so that we can use our discussion time more efficiently

Reading Responses will be graded **Credit/No Credit** on the basis of completion and general quality. Commit to this writing practice without worrying too much about the volume of your prose.

For students taking this class asynchronously or who might be absent on class days: please submit in lieu of the in-class reading response a short essay (500-750 words) responding to the prompt. Since you will not have the same time constraints, your writing should be more formal in style and proofread. Write with a clear thesis in mind, which you must underline. These responses will also be marked **Credit/No Credit** and should be uploaded to Blackboard within 24 hours of our regular class meeting time.

3) Midterm essay/review: choose one of the following:

Option one: write a thesis-driven essay (1000-1250 words, or about 4-5 pages) on some topic emerging from our readings and class discussion. You could start with one of your freewriting response papers and develop it into a formal essay or come up with a new topic. No outside reading is required.

Option two: write a critical book review (750-1000 words, or about 3-4 pages) of one of the books listed in the recommended reading section of the syllabus. It must be a full book—and one we've not read in part for class. The book can come from any week (even weeks we've not gotten to yet). You should paraphrase the argument of the book, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and reflect on how it relates to the readings we've been doing in class. You might ask, for instance: What does the book do well? What understanding of religion or secularism does it employ? How could it be improved or supplemented by considering another approach that has come up in our readings? What does it add to scholarly conversations about religion, secularism, and power?

Your thesis essay or critical book review will be due on **Friday, 10/23 by 3pm**. Include a word count and, if you chose the essay option, underline your central thesis. There is a 2-day "grace" period for this assignment; if you need the extra time, just let me know before the original due date.

4) Final essay or creative project: You have the option of submitting a **final research paper** (~2000 words for undergrads and ~4000 words for grads) on a topic of your choice related to the themes of the class OR a **creative project** related to the themes of the class. You should consult with me before week 10 to discuss your ideas for the final essay or creative project. I suggest making an appointment during office hours. One point to note upfront: creative work should not be directly autobiographical. Creative work should include research on a topic, but might be delivered in a variety of **creative digital forms**—a comic book, a short film, a play, a mock TED talk, a website, etc. Include a **short (300-500 word) rationale/author's statement and a bibliography** upon final submission. The final essay or creative project will be due one week after the last day of class.

GRADING

This course uses specifications grading. In this approach, which you can read more about [here](#), all assignments are graded **credit/no credit** (or pass/fail). In order to pass, you need to do satisfactory work—**roughly, B-level work or better**, if we were thinking in terms of the conventional system. Letter grades will not be determined by averaging grades on individual assignments; instead, **you determine your overall grade** by deciding which assignments you want to complete and then completing them on time. If you complete all the assignments in a given grade category at a satisfactory level, you will receive that grade. Performing below the required amount for a D will result in a failing grade. Note: if you plan to take this class asynchronously, we'll chat privately at the beginning of the semester to outline expectations so you can succeed in this course.

This approach allows you greater control over your learning experience and should bring clarity to the expectations for grades. The more assignments you complete, the better you will become at 1) understanding the relationships among religion, secularism, and power; 2) analyzing key themes; 3) thinking critically; 4) communicating through writing; 5) reading conceptually difficult material; and 4) researching and presenting on a given topic.

For an A, students will:

- 1) complete 12 reading responses
- 2) complete the midterm essay
- 3) complete the final project
- 4) participate weekly in class discussions

For an A-, students will:

- 1) complete 11 reading responses
- 2) complete the midterm essay
- 3) complete the final project
- 4) participate weekly in class discussions

For a B+, students will:

- 1) complete 10 reading responses
- 2) complete the midterm essay
- 3) complete the final project
- 4) participate weekly in class discussions

For a B-, students will:

- 1) complete 8 reading responses
- 2) complete the midterm essay
- 3) participate weekly in class discussions

For a C, students will:

- 1) complete 8 reading responses
- 2) participate in some class discussions

For a B, students will:

- 1) complete 9 reading responses
- 2) complete the midterm essay
- 3) complete the final project
- 4) participate weekly in class discussions

For a C+, students will:

- 1) complete 10 reading responses
- 2) participate in some in class discussions

For a D, students will:

- 1) complete 6 reading responses
- 2) participate in some class discussions

COURSE CONTENT WARNING

At times, the material we read and our discussions in class will broach potentially disturbing or sexually explicit topics, including sexual, religious, and racial violence. It would be irresponsible to study religion, politics, and secularism without paying attention to such topics. I ask that we all try to confront and work through these topics as best we can, realizing that confronting difficult texts and ideas (whether because of their style or their content) is critical to the work we do as students, as scholars, and as members of the BU community. You are always welcome to meet with me before or after discussions or assigned readings to discuss personal reactions to such topics.

VIDEO RECORDINGS

This class will not be recorded. Given the nature of a seminar discussion—and the sensitive and challenging topics that we will broach this semester—I have decided that it is best not to record our conversations. Within the bounds of respect for our interlocutors, seminars should allow for free expression, for experimenting with new, sometimes not-yet-formed ideas. They should allow for mistakes, providing a space for practice, not perfection. In order to foster the best discussions possible, we need the affordance of ephemerality, for our words and thinking not to be locked in time and space. If you are taking this class asynchronously, please contact your instructor to discuss options for participating.

LATE WORK

Should you need an extension on an assignment, please request it *before* the day on which it is due. Your request may or may not be granted depending on the assignment and the circumstances for requiring extra time, but it never hurts to ask, if you need the time. The one exception here is for the weekly reading responses—those must be submitted before the start of class on days they are due in order to count for the C/NC part of that assignment.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are responsible for knowing, understanding, and obeying the Academic Conduct Code and policies regarding plagiarism. This policy is outlined here: <http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>. If you have questions, please ask the instructor. For further direction, you can consult the Chicago Manual of Style at http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are a student with a disability and need accommodations, please see the instructor and contact the appropriate program under BU's Disability Services: <http://www.bu.edu/disability/>.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

Consistent with the BU's commitment to inclusivity, I promise to do my best to run class in a manner that is respectful of difference, which includes, but is not limited to, physical and mental ability, age, socio-economic status, religious identity, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, and veteran status. You are expected to be respectful of these differences in your conduct in class and on campus.

OFFICE HOURS

My office hours are by appointment. If you have a lot to cover, please feel free to book two consecutive appointments. To book a time, please go here: apetro.youcanbook.me. For the actual appointment, held in Zoom, please go here: <https://bostonu.zoom.us/my/apetro>. My meeting code is 987 543 9834.

REQUIRED READINGS

The following required texts have been ordered at BU Barnes and Noble; they are also available (new or used) from numerous online sellers and for free, including as e-books, at the BU library. Any version is fine, though ones with page numbers are best. Additional assigned readings, marked **(Bb)**, are available on Blackboard.

- **Winnifred Fallers Sullivan**, *The Impossibility of Religion Freedom*
- **Saba Mahmood**, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*
- **Toni Morrison**, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*
- **Molly McGarry**, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth Century America*
- **Peter Coviello**, *Make Yourself Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism*
- **Jane Iwamura**, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*
- **Henry Goldschmidt**, *Race and Religion among the Chosen People of Crown Heights*
- **Vincent Lloyd**, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology*
- **Joan Wallach Scott**, *Sex and Secularism*
- **Jolyon Thomas**, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan*
- **Tisa Wenger**, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*

COURSE SCHEDULE

I. Opening Query: Is ‘Religious Freedom’ Possible?

Week One

Tuesday, 9/8: **Religion, Knowledge, and the Art of Discussion**

- Introductions + syllabus
- Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “We Aren’t Here to Learn What We Already Know,” *Avidly* **(Bb)**

Week Two

Tuesday, 9/15: **The Curious Politics of Religious Freedom**

- Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religion Freedom*

GS: Michel Foucault, “Pastoral Power and Political Reason,” *Religion and Culture*, p135-152 **(Bb)**

Recommended: David Sehat, The Myth of American Religious Freedom; Sullivan, Church State Corporation; Finbarr Curtis, The Production of American Religious Freedom

II. Defining Our Terms: Secularism, Secularization, the Secular, Religion, Freedom

Week Three

Tuesday, 9/22: **Modernity, Secularization, Secularism, and the Secular**

- José Casanova, “Secularization, Enlightenment, and Modern Religion” in *Public Religions in the Modern World*, p11-39 **(Bb)**
- Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Craig Calhoun, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, p1-28 **(Bb)**
- Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “Times Like These,” from *Secularisms*, p1-17 **(Bb)**
- Talal Asad, “Secularism, Nation-State, Religion,” in *Formations of the Secular*, p181-201 **(Bb)**

GS: Talal Asad, “Introduction: Thinking about Secularism” in *Formations of the Secular*, p1-17 **(Bb)**

Recommended: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Jose Casanova, “The Deprivatization of Modern Religion,” in *Public Religions in the Modern World*, p211-243; Rajeev Bhargava, “Rehabilitating Secularism,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, p92-113; Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*; Charles McCrary and Jeffrey Wheatley, “The Protestant Secular in the Study of American Religion” in *Religion*, 256-176

Week Four

Tuesday, 9/29: **Feminism, Freedom, and the Subjects of Secularism**

- Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, p1-78; 118-188

GJ: Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture*, p323-347 (**Bb**)

Recommended: Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*; Joan Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*; Elayne Oliphant, *The Privilege of Being Banat*; Roundtable on Saba Mahmood in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (87:4), essays by Andrea Jain, Joseph Blankholm, Judith Butler, Anthony Petro, Sherine Hafez, Bryan Turner, and Angie Heo

III. Genealogies of Secularism in U.S. Religion

Week Five

Tuesday, 10/6: **Race, Personhood, Imagination**

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*
- Sylvester Johnson, “Personhood,” in *Religion, Law, USA*, p248-264 (**Bb**)

GJ: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs*, p251-274 (**Bb**)

Recommended: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*; Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000*; Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming*; Sarah Imhoff, *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism*; Kimberly Arkin, *Rhinestones, Religion, and the Republic*

Week Six

Tuesday, 10/13: **NO CLASS (“BU Monday” schedule)**

Week Seven

Tuesday, 10/20: **Spiritualist Secularism**

- Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*
- Guest speaker: Prof. Molly McGarry

Recommended: Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Margarita Guillory, *Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spiritual Churches*; Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*; Pamela Klassen, *Spirits of Protestantism*; Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*

Week Eight

Tuesday, 10/27: **Mormons and the Unfinished Business of Secularism**

- Peter Coviello, *Make Yourself Gods*
- Guest speaker: Prof. Peter Coviello

Recommended: John Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*; Emily Ogden, *Credulity*; Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time*; Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question*

IV. Race, Sex, and Secularism in Recent U.S. History

Week Nine

Tuesday, 11/3: **Religion, Orientalism, and Popular Culture**

- Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*

Recommended: Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters*; Michael Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of Indian, 1721-1893*

Week Ten

Tuesday, 11/10: **Religion and Race under the Sign of Culture**

- Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion among the Chosen People of Crown Heights*

Recommended: Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*; Lindsay Reckson, *Realist Ecstasy*; Samira Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah*; Russell M. Jeung, Seanan S. Fong, and Helen Jin Kim, *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans*

Week Eleven

Tuesday, 11/17: **Black Secularism and Black Theology**

- Vincent Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*
- Guest speaker: Prof. Vincent Lloyd

Recommended: Jonathon Kahn and Vincent Lloyd, *Race and Secularism in America*; Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism*; Joseph Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*

Week Twelve

Tuesday, 11/24: **The Sexual Politics of Secularism**

- Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism*

Recommended: Janet Jakobsen, *The Sex Obsession*; Heather White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*; Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*

V. Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom Redux

Week Thirteen

Tuesday, 12/1: **Imposing Religious Freedom**

- Jolyon Thomas, *Faking Liberties*
- Guest speaker: Prof. Jolyon Thomas

Recommended: Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes*; Duncan Ryuken Williams, *American Sutra*; Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*

Week Fourteen

Tuesday, 12/8: **Colonialism, Race, and Religious Freedom**

- Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*
- Guest speaker: Prof. Tisa Wenger

Recommended: Anna Su, *Exporting Religious Freedom*; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Pete Danchin, *Politics of Religious Freedom*; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom*